

Oakland Army Base
(Oakland Sub-Port of the
San Francisco Port of Embarkation)
Maritime Street at West Grand Avenue
Oakland
Alameda County
California

HAER No. CA-125

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Western Region
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94107

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
OAKLAND ARMY BASE
(Oakland Sub-Port of the San Francisco Port of Embarkation)

HAER No. CA-125

Location: Maritime Street at West Grand Avenue, Oakland, Alameda County, California

USGS Oakland West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: Northing 4184900, Easting 560150

Dates of Construction: 1918 (HAER No. CA-125-H); 1919 (HAER No. CA-125-F); 1941-43 (remainder of buildings). All buildings have been altered since originally constructed.

Architect: Primarily by Bechtel-McCone-Parsons Corporation, Architect-Engineers, San Francisco, California.

Contractor: Primarily by The Army Port Contractors, a joint venture of MacDonald & Kahn, Inc.; The Utah Construction Company; and W.A. Bechtel and Bechtel-McCone-Parsons Corporation. At least initially, some 600 black troops of the 394th Quartermaster Battalion helped in construction of the Installation. Additional subcontractors and suppliers consisted primarily of businesses in the San Francisco Bay area.

Present Owner and Occupant: Military Traffic Management Command, Western Area
Oakland Army Base, CA 94626-5000

Present Use: Military functions

Significance: Oakland Army Base served in an important capacity during the Second World War (1941-1945), and is therefore eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, representing broad patterns of American history, at the local, state and national levels of significance. According to the U.S. Army, it was "the only complete Army port installation in the nation set up with rail marshalling yards, huge warehouses, waterside transit sheds, and piers capable of handling the largest transport cargo ships, supported by shops, a complete rail system linking the entire operation, administrative and service buildings, a dry dock for handling smaller boats and ships, and temporary quarters for housing troops. It also served as the port's disposition center, through which moved all military personnel returning from overseas assignments."

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Historic Districts Map



I. DESCRIPTION

Two historic districts have been identified on Oakland Army Base: a Northwest Historic District comprising administrative and operational facilities, and a Northeast Historic District dominated by warehouse activities. The districts are depicted in Figure 1, the Historic Districts Map, and shown in the accompanying aerial photographs (*Photographs CA-125-1, CA-125-2 and CA-125-3*). Twelve individual buildings/building types, plus three wharves and a railroad yard, have been identified by Caltrans within these districts (Historic Property Survey Report, Volume 4, For the Proposed I-880 Reconstruction Project in the Cities of Oakland and Emeryville, Alameda County, September 1990) as possessing sufficient integrity to be eligible for listing in the NRHP. The California State Historic Preservation Officer has concurred. The Department of the Interior's Division of National Register Programs has assigned a general Historic American Engineering Record to this project: HAER No. CA-125. Each building/building type is further differentiated by a letter suffix. Since the Knight Rail Yard and wharf areas have long term requirements, the recordation for these structures are not included in this plan. However, because these two facilities are integral elements, photographs of them are provided under HAER No. CA-125-N (Knight Rail Yard) and HAER No. CA-125-O (Wharf Nos. 6, 6-1/2, and 7). HAER No. CA-125-A (Transit Shed, Building 161) was documented at an earlier time and then demolished. The 26th Street Overpass (southern leg of the Interurban Electric Railway 26th Street Junction Bridge), another eligible structure, has also been demolished. Documentation is being performed by Caltrans. The buildings/building types documented in this report are:

In the Northwest District:

HAER No. CA-125-B	Post Headquarters Building (Administration Building, Bldg. No. 1) (<i>Photographs CA-125-4 and CA-125-7</i>)
HAER No. CA-125-C	Privately Owned Vehicle Inspection Building (Vehicle Shed, Bldg. No. 4)
HAER No. CA-125-D	Exchange Cafeteria (Building No. 60) (<i>Photograph CA-125-4</i>)
HAER No. CA-125-E	Printing Plant (Storehouse, Building No. 85) (<i>Photographs CA-125-4, CA-125-5, and CA-125-10</i>)
HAER No. CA-125-F	Storehouse (Building No. 88) (<i>Photographs CA-125-5 and CA-125-10</i>)
HAER No. CA-125-G	General Purpose Administration Building (Building No. 90) (<i>Photographs CA-125-5 and CA-125-10</i>)
HAER No. CA-125-H	Vehicle Maintenance Shop (Building No. 99) (<i>Photograph CA-125-5</i>)

In the Northeast District:

HAER No. CA-125-I	Warehouses (Building Nos. 802-808) (<i>Photograph CA-125-6</i>)
HAER No. CA-125-J	Vehicle Maintenance Shop (Repair Shop, Building No. 812) (<i>Photograph CA-125-6</i>)
HAER No. CA-125-K	Storehouses (Building Nos. 821 and 822) (<i>Photograph CA-125-6</i>)

HAER No. CA-125-L	Box and Crate Shop (Building No. 823) (<i>Photograph CA-125-6</i>)
HAER No. CA-125-M	Railroad Engine Shop (Switch Engine Building, Building No. 991)

Photographs Only:

HAER No. CA-125-N	Knight Rail Yard
HAER No. CA-125-O	Wharf Nos. 6 (Pier No. 6), 6-1/2, and 7

II. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Introduction

The history of a particular property is normally traced through investigation of both the existing and previous structures that occupy the site, as well as through archaeological examination. At Oakland Army Base this is not possible because the land occupied by the Installation was unreclaimed tidal marsh land until sometime in the second decade of this century.

At least as recently as 1911, real estate maps of west Oakland indicate that the land upon which the Installation is built, presently referred to as the Outer Harbor, was a broad mud flat.¹ The shoreline at that time was east of the present-day Southern Pacific 16th Street Railroad Classification Yard. These mud flats were extensive, fanning out two to three miles into San Francisco Bay before dropping off into deep water.² Sometime during the 1910s, a portion of the area west of Maritime Street was filled in, and a few industrial buildings constructed. The remaining marsh lands were developed following their purchase by the U.S. Army in 1941.

Although the historical beginnings of Oakland, California go back to the time of Spanish colonization in the early 1800s, the historical development of Oakland Army Base begins, for all practical purposes, with the founding of the Installation in the early 1940s. The early history of the Oakland area had little direct impact on the Base, with the exception of events related to the development of the waterfront areas of the Outer Harbor. These relevant events are briefly described to orient the reader, followed by a full discussion of Oakland Army Base's evolution.

Historical Beginnings of Oakland's Waterfront

Oakland's location on San Francisco Bay, a natural protected anchorage, is undoubtedly the most significant contributing factor to its early development. Not a great deal of documentation exists on the early inhabitants of the East Bay region, though they are generally regarded to have been consistent with other native Americans living along the coast of California.³ As hunters and gatherers, they lived a relatively peaceful existence until the time of the Spanish colonization of *Alta California*.⁴ The

¹ Bagwell, Beth, *Oakland, The Story of a City*, pp. 202-3.

² Malloy, E.E., *Appraisal of Oakland Army Base*, p. 2.

³ Bagwell, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Spanish referred to the Indians in California as "Costanoans," or "the coastal people", reinforcing the importance of water to the colonists.⁵

The Franciscan missions in California, which began with the establishment of the San Diego mission in 1769, spread rapidly northward. By 1776, the first mission in the bay area, Mission Dolores de San Francisco, was founded. Rather than strictly religious encampments, the Spanish missions were not unlike the great landed estates of Spain, supporting several hundred people.⁶

Luis Maria Peralta (1759-1851), born in Sonora, Mexico, came to the bay area's newest mission, Mission de San Jose, soon after its founding in 1797. As a soldier, Peralta received a grant of land upon his retirement in 1820. This grant encompassed some 44,800 acres of land — virtually all of Oakland, and about one-tenth of today's Alameda County.⁷

By the 1840s, the entire San Francisco Bay area was booming. The Gold Rush, which began in 1848-49, opened the region to rapid migration from the United States (California was still a Mexican colony at the time). Logging in nearby mountains, especially of redwoods, underscored the bay's economic and strategic value. On September 9, 1850, California was admitted as a state in the Union. Within two years, the town of Oakland was incorporated by the state legislature (May 4, 1852).⁸

Two weeks following the city's incorporation, on May 17, 1852, the first mayor of Oakland, Horace W. Carpentier, managed to secure for himself the deed to the waterfront. This granted him the "exclusive right and privilege of constructing wharves, piers, and docks."⁹ The profit potential of Oakland's waterfront was enormous, and it was not long before the deed was challenged. For nearly 60 years, the case wound its way through the state and federal court system. Finally, in 1907 the United States Circuit Court decided in the city's favor, stripping Carpentier's heirs of their waterfront monopoly. In essence, all wharfing-out rights were returned to the city for land extending from the "low tide line of 1852" to deeper water.¹⁰ The California State Legislature codified this decision with an Act dated May 1, 1911, "granting the City of Oakland full right and title to all tide lands between the said Low Tide Line of 1852 and ships channel or the Oakland city limits."¹¹ This low tide line is marked by the eastern edge of Maritime Street. In 1941 when the U.S. Army purchased land on both sides of Maritime, only the property to the west had been developed.

The City of Oakland moved rapidly to expand its port capabilities following the 1911 Act. The Union Construction Company appears to have been the first lessee from the city of land in the Outer Harbor.¹² The majority of new construction, primarily industrial or administrative, was carried out by Union Construction in 1918 and 1919. Two of these structures, Buildings 88 and 99, were on land purchased by the U.S. Army

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 8-10.

⁸ Ibid., p. 33.

⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁰ Malloy, p. 1.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 2.

¹² Ibid., pp. 16-32.

for the construction of the new Oakland Port of Embarkation (later OARB). These two buildings, which have been renovated, are still used by the Installation (see HAER documentation on each of these facilities later in this report).

In 1933, property leased to the Union Construction Company was reclaimed by the City of Oakland. The records seem to indicate that little or no use was made of the property or the improvements on them during the period between 1933 and 1941, when the properties were purchased by the U.S. Army.

World War II and the San Francisco Port of Embarkation

The United States remained neutral during most of the 1930s, partly due to the great economic strain that the depression of the previous decade had placed on the country. However, the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 signaled to military planners that U.S. isolationism could come to an end. Although slowly at first, civilian manufacturing began to retool for the manufacture of military matériel. U.S. military strength was increased as well.

Between 1939 and 1941, the San Francisco Bay area became an important logistical component in the military's Pacific theater preparations. This required the movement of vastly greater quantities of troops and cargo, putting a strain on the existing facilities at the San Francisco Port of Embarkation (SFPE).¹³ With its headquarters at Fort Mason at the northern tip of the San Francisco peninsula, the SFPE served as the coordinator for all west coast military transportation requirements.¹⁴ Their primary responsibility was to provide logistical support for troop movements in the Pacific theater of operations.¹⁵ By December 1941, the cargo handling facilities in SFPE's jurisdiction were comprised of three deepwater finger piers at Fort Mason.¹⁶ Fort McDowell, situated on Angel Island just north of Fort Mason in San Francisco Bay, functioned as the Army's personnel processing center.¹⁷ An average of 22,000 troops were already being handled at this Installation each year.¹⁸ Fort McDowell operated its own ferry service between the island and Fort Mason, where the troop ships were anchored.¹⁹

Pre-war transportation planners had determined that the existing facilities were inadequate to meet future needs, especially if SFPE's logistical situation changed drastically.²⁰ An escalation of troop movements into the Pacific theater, along with the increased support requirements, would leave SFPE's existing facilities overtaxed. An expansion of facilities became a high priority.²¹

¹³ Wullenjohn, Chuck, San Francisco Port of Embarkation "America's Pipeline to the Pacific", p. 1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Expansion of SFPE

Realizing that SFPE's existing facilities were inadequate to match its expanded mission, a three person planning board was created to search for new sites.²² Brig. Gen. John Lee, commander of SFPE, headed the board which subsequently identified a partly developed site in the Oakland Outer Harbor.²³ The board's recommendation was that this area, which consisted of 276 acres of land, be acquired by whatever means available.²⁴

Construction at the new site began in June 1941.²⁵ When completed in 1943, Oakland Army Base was the largest single cargo terminal facility for SFPE.²⁶ The Base also served as a major troop transport center.

Supplemental troop processing facilities were also required, as Fort McDowell was no longer capable of handling the increasing numbers of troops departing or arriving through SFPE.²⁷ To satisfy this need, War Department planners selected a 2,500 acre site on the Sacramento River.²⁸ Camp Stoneman opened in May of 1942, augmenting the troop processing facilities at Fort McDowell, 44 miles southwest.²⁹

At the height of wartime activity, the San Francisco Port of Embarkation comprised four major military facilities: Fort Mason, Fort McDowell, Oakland Army Base, and Camp Stoneman. The activities of these bases were supplemented by facilities scattered around the San Francisco Bay area.³⁰

Oakland Army Base

The site for the new SFPE Installation sits on shallow tideland and faces the waterfront of the east shore of San Francisco Bay known as Oakland Outer Harbor. Partial filling of these salt water marshes occurred during the period between 1912 and 1930.³¹ When construction of the Installation began in June 1941, additional tideland filling was completed with a sublayer of hydraulic sand fill, capped by a 6 to 20 foot

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ U.S. Army Transportation Engineering Agency, USATEA Report 73-2 A Transportation Engineering Study of Military Ocean Terminal Bay Area, Oakland Army Base, p. 5.

thick layer of dry fill.³² In total, approximately six million cubic yards of rock fill was required.³³

Not much more than 25% of construction was completed by the time the Base was commissioned on December 8, 1941, the day following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.³⁴ Col. Robert L. Allen, the first commander of the "Oakland Sub-Port of the San Francisco Port of Embarkation," as OARB was originally known,³⁵ recalled that many of the Installation's on-duty personnel were not even aware that the commissioning had taken place, as no formal ceremony was organized.³⁶ "We were in a state of shock that morning. With all the Construction going on, we were too busy to even think about a ceremony."³⁷

Upon completion in 1943, at a cost of \$35 million, the Installation comprised "13 deep draft ship berths, over 175 buildings and structures, 27 miles of rail trackage, and millions of square feet of open and covered storage."³⁸ By War Department Circular No. 321, dated December 11, 1943, the waterfront areas were designated Oakland Army Base, effective January 1, 1944. Many of these buildings and facilities were devoted to operational aspects of the Installation's World War II mission. Various support activities were provided in the southern section of the Base, known as Camp John T. [Thornton] Knight.³⁹ Brig. Gen. Knight, a veteran of the Spanish American and First World Wars, served three tours of duty in San Francisco, where he died in the 1930s.⁴⁰ On April 3, 1946, Camp John T. Knight was unified with Oakland Army Base, and the Camp Knight designation discontinued (War Department Circular No. 100).⁴¹

For the duration of the war, the majority of all outbound military cargo handled by SFPE in the San Francisco area, was exported from OARB.⁴² Estimates have placed the totals at between 8.5 and 10 million measurement tons (a measurement ton is a unit of capacity rather than weight, and is equal to 40 cubic feet).^{43,44}

³² Ibid.

³³ Wullenjohn, p. 6.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ U.S. Army Transportation Engineering Agency, p. 4.

³⁶ Wullenjohn, p. 6.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Wullenjohn, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Oakland Post-Enquirer, July 29, 1942 and San Francisco Chronicle, July 30, 1942.

⁴¹ Wullenjohn, p. 6.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ U.S. Army Transportation Engineering Agency, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Wullenjohn, p. 6.

Oakland Army Base: From the 1950s To Today

Following the end of WWII, activities on OARB were curtailed and reduced.⁴⁵ However, this was only temporary. With the outbreak of the Korean Action in 1950, it was necessary to expand OARB's duties once again. Over a two month period, cargo loadings rose by 500 percent.⁴⁶ In the three years of the Korean Action, the Installation shipped 7.2 million measurement tons of cargo overseas.⁴⁷ The Base also played a major role during the Viet Nam Conflict in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as in the Desert Storm Campaign on the Arabian Peninsula in the early 1990s.

Oakland Army Base is the last remaining component of the SFPE.⁴⁸ In February 1965, the U.S. Army established five Military Traffic Management and Terminal Service (MTMTS) traffic regions. One of these, the Western Traffic Region, was headquartered at Oakland Army Base. Western Area MTMTS later became Military Traffic Management Command Western Area (MTMCWA).

IV. SOURCES

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⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

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Supplemental Material

Survey Photographs. All photographs were taken in January 1994 by Adrian Ordenana.

Building Drawings. All as-builts are on file in the Installation Engineering Office, Oakland Army Base, Oakland, California.

General Site Map and Inset Maps. The General Site Maps were prepared by Hermann Zillgens Associates in 1993.

Historic Photographs. All historic photographs were duplicated from originals in the "Completion Reports" submitted by J.T. Smoody, Major, CE, June 1942 (see Primary Sources in Section 4.1).